DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 865 CG 015 097

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TITLE Recollections of Childhood: Changing Perspectives.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (33rd, San Diego, CA, November 21-25, 1980). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Development; *Age Differences; Aging (Individuals); Attitude Change; Gerontology; Influences; *Memory; Older Adults; *Recall (Psychology); *Retention (Psychology); *Time Perspective

ABSTRACT

Research in aging has placed considerable faith in data collected from the recollections and reminiscences of older people. Retrospective reports were verified against previously collected data to determine the accuracy of topical information provided by anamnestic reports as well as the types of persons most likely to be accurate reporters. Subjects were a representative sample of parents interviewed about the happiness of their own childhood at three different times over a span of 50 years. Results indicated that perceptions of the past changed over time and showed an internal consistency. However, findings suggest that further research is needed to determine what causes adults to change their earlier perceptions in a particular direction. (KMF)

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RECOLLECTIONS OF CHILDHOOD: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

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CG 015097

Paper presented at the Meetings of the Gerontological Society, San Diego, CA, November, 1980.

Recollections of Childhood: Changing Perspectives

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The study of recollections of normal persons of past events in their own personal lives is important, but seldom is it undertaken. Theories of personality development have relied heavily on retrospective reports for evidence of the influence of earlier events on later personality characteristics. From the time of Freud, retrospective reports have provided much of the substance in studies concerned with the role of early experience and parental functioning in personality development. Similarly, theorists of aging have necessarily placed considerable faith in data collected from old people through recollections and reminiscence. Yet we know very little about how much can be observed by the recollector/informant, or how much can be retained, or how it will be reported.

There have been few studies of retrospective reports at any time (for a review, see Field, 1979), and most of these have examined mothers' reports of events in the early lives of their children (Douglas & Blomfield, 1956; Pyles, Stolz, & Macfarlane, 1935; Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970) or the reports of young adults who were subjects of longitudinal studies (Cherry & Rodgers, 1979; Livson & McNeill, 1962; Weishaus, 1978). The only studies that have been able to investigate the recall of older persons have examined memory for public events (Squire, 1974), public faces (Warrington & Sanders, 1971), objects in common use (Poon & Fozard, 1978), or events of limited personal significance (Baddeley, Lewis, & Nimmo-Smith, 1979). In spite of the obvious

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importance of the question, I have found no other studies that have investigated the accuracy of reports by elderly people of personal events occurring earlier in their own lives.

Only a longitudinal study, in which the retrospective reports can be verified against data collected at earlier times, can determine whether anamnestic reports do provide accurate information, what topics tend to be reported accurately, or what sorts of persons are most likely to be accurate reporters. This paper describes such a study.

Method

Subjects

My subjects are a representative sample of a group of young adults who became parents of babies in Berkeley,California 50 years ago (Macfarlane, 1938). These babies became the subjects of the famous Guidance Study at the Institute of Human Development, and their contribution to our understanding of child development is incalculable, but immense (Jones et al, 1971). The parents, originally studied only for their influence on their children, have recently come to be seen as subjects of great interest in their own right (Field, in press; Kuypers, 1974; Maas & Kuypers, 1977; Mussen et al, 1980), and are now recognized as part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging.

These adults were interviewed intensively when their children became part of the Guidance Study, in 1928 and 1929; again when their children were 17 years old, in 1945-1947; and when their children were 40, in 1968-1969.

My report concerns all of the parents for whom we have complete data at all three time periods. These survivors were on average age 69 at the time of the last follow-up, with a range of 58 to 80. Although they are a favored group in some ways, they still are broadly representative of surviving persons of their age: every educational level is represented, from less than 7 years

to graduate degrees; as is every occupational level, from unskilled laborer to high professionals. All of the group still live in California, and 80% are within a one-hour drive of the city where their children were born more than 50 years ago -- a stable population. Their average IQ at age 69 was 119, normally distributed around this high mean.

As is common with longitudinal studies, some of the subjects did not furnish some of the information some of the time. When this happens, with many sorts of analysis all data for that subject for that variable is eliminated. Forty-two of the group were rated on the happiness of their childhoods at all three time periods, and it is their data that will be examined here.

Research Question

This paper examines the change over time in one variable: the report of each subject on the happiness of his or her own childhood, reports made at widely separated intervals over 40 years. It was found that the reports of the happiness of their own childhoods became more positive for the group as time went on (see Figure 1). The actual events of childhood had not changed, but the perceptions of the recollectors altered with time.

Why should this be? To answer this question, I will describe the relationships of about 30 variables, some concerned with other events in the subject's childhood, others descriptive of the adult subject, with the changing perceptions of the happiness of childhood. These variables are listed in Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 2 and 3.

Results

Three kinds of analysis were done, for there were three kinds of variables.

First, for some variables there was only one time of measurement: age, IQ, and others. The relationship of these variables to the change of reports

of childhood were examined with repeated measures analyses of variance. Figure 2 shows the measures from the subjects' own recollections of childhood with change in reports of happiness of childhood. Figure 3 outlines measures having to do with the subject as an adult and how these measures affected reports of childhood. It can be seen that the events taking place in childhood, as they were reported in young adulthood, are more often significantly related to the reports of happiness in childhood than are the more objective measures taken in adulthood.

The top three variables of Figure 2, whether the subject's family structure was intact through childhood or not, whether the health of the subject in childhood was good or poor, and the number of siblings showed strong significant relationships to recollections of childhood happiness. Other variables, though less significant, are in the predicted direction, except for SES measures.

Fewer of the measures taken in adulthood were related to reports of childhood happiness, as shown in Figure 3. Sex, age, education, occupation, and IQ simply were not related to childhood reports. Surprisingly, the rating of life satisfaction made when the subjects were interviewed at age 69 was not significantly related to recollections of childhood. The rating of emotional tone of the subject's own family, made in middle age, produced an interesting interaction: those who lived in happy homes remembered a happy childhood, somber homes were associated with less happy recollections, and average homes harbored people with average recollections, all in the reports made in middle age.

Table 1 shows variables that were expected to be related to perceptions of childhood. At both follow-up interviews, taken when the subjects were middle aged and young-old, the raters were asked to indicate whether there was "any indication of immediate, possible transitory, problems, such as illness, bereavement, depression, which might have been affecting the subject's cognitive functioning at the time of the interview?" Table 1 shows the eight people who

were rated affirmatively at middle age. Their contemporary reports of childhood were indeed lower than the rest, but the ten subjects judged to have some cognitive impairment at the young-old interview did not show a significant difference in childhood recollections. Those subjects who died within five years of the last follow-up were compared with the rest for their reports of childhood, and once again, no differences in happiness were found, although in each of these cases what differences there were were in the predicted direction.

The third group of variables required a different sort of analysis. Some questions had been asked at each interview, so it was possible to compare the changing answers to these questions just as I compared the changing reports of childhood. The question was whether the other recollections changed in the same direction as happy childhood reports, and I found that often they did.

For each variable each subject was classified as increasing, decreasing, or stable over time, and each variable was examined for concordance with the increase, decrease, or stable reports of childhood, using Kendall's tau, which analyzes relationships of ordinal measures. For each separate analysis, subjects whose responses were mixed, that is, their responses both increased and decreased from one interview to the next, were eliminated from that analysis.

Table 2 shows the results of the examinations of these questions and how they changed along with the reports of happiness of childhood. The first group includes variables that have not really changed: relationship and bond with mother and father during childhood, marital adjustment of parents, and the quality of intellectual life in the childhood home. Only the subject's perceptions of these could have changed, and they had. It can be seen that for three of the six variables, changes of perceptions were significantly in concordance with the changed reports of childhood happiness. In contrast, only one of the five variables in which measured change was real: relationship and bond with own child, financial status, health, marital adjustment was signifi-

cant. In fact, correlations simply were not found. It should be noted that the subject's health in adulthood had no influence on recollections of childhood, although his health in childhood was strongly related to early recollections.

Discussion

The study makes it quite clear that perceptions of the past do change over time. This was true for all variables and for all people.

More important, it appears that the retrospective reports of most childhood events change together: for those people whose perceptions get rosier at time goes on and for those whose views become more pessimistic over time. Most early recollections show an internal consistency. This supports the theory of Adler about early recollections (1931, p. 73-74).

> Among all psychic expressions, some of the most revealing are the individual's memories. . . There are no "chance memories"; out of the incalcalculable number of impressions which meet an individual, he chooses to remember only those which he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation. . . Memories can never run counter to the style of life. . . In so far as his style of life alters, his memories also will alter; he will remember different incidents, or he will put a different interpretation on the incidents he remembers.

We have not yet, however, answered the second question: what is it about an adult person that leads him or her to change earlier perceptions in a particular direction? Four measures that were expected to be predictors: health, life satisfaction, terminal drop (Riegel & Riegel, 1972), and cognitive dysfunction (Linn, 1973) did not prove to be so for this group.

Adler, I think, would not be dismayed. He would urge an examination of personality characteristics, not the actuarial and demographic variables I could examine now. This will form the basis of my next inquiry.

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Table 1

Examination of Variables

Measured at One Time Only

	Mean	t	p <
Cognitive Functioning in Middle Age with Report of Childhood at Middle Age			
Problems (N = 8)	2.43	(56)	.05
No Problems	1.77	2.02	
Cognitive Fuctioning in Young-old Age with Report of Childhood at Young-old Age			
Problems (N = 10)	1.70	(58)	NS
No problems	1.54	.70	
Terminal Drop			
Those who died within five years (N = 13)	1.61	(56)	NS
Those who lived more than five years	1.56	.77	

Table 2

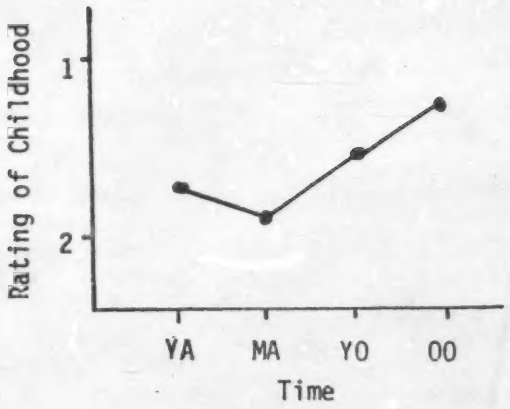
Comparison of Change over Time in Childhood Variables, in which only the Perceptions Have Changed, and in Adult Variables, Where True Change had Occurred and may have Influenced Perceptions of Childhood

Retrospective Variables	Tau	p <
Intellectual Childhood	.41	.05
Bond with Mother	.19	.10
Relationship with Mother	.25	.05
Relationship with Father	.28	.03
Bond with Father	.13	NS
Marital Adjustment of Parents	.07	NS
Concurrent Variables		
Marital Adjustment	.22	.05
Financial Status	.03	NS
Relationship with Child	.04	NS
Bond with Child	-.06	NS
Health	-.09	NS

Figure 1

Changing Perspectives of the

Happiness of Childhood



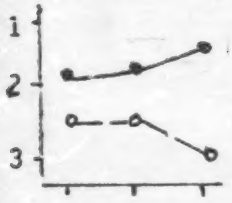
Note: The first three measurements are ratings made on the basis of clinical interviews in 1928-1929, 1945-1947, and 1968-1969. The fourth was asked as part of a questionnaire in 1973 (Elder, 1979).

Linear trend significant: $p = .0002$.

Figure 2

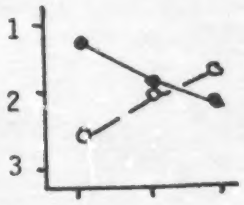
Relationship of Happy Childhood Reports

with Other Measures from Childhood



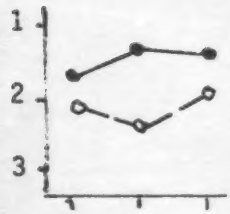
Childhood family structure (N = 30)
- intact
- not intact

Groups $p < .02$



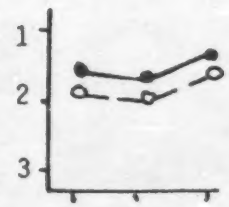
Emotional expressiveness of Subject's Mother (N = 15)
- demonstrative
- not demonstrative

Interaction $p = .004$



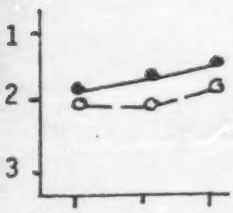
Health in Childhood (N = 25)
- good
- poor

Groups $p = .004$
Interaction $p = .003$



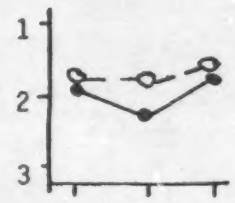
Location of Childhood Home (N = 34)
- rural
- urban

NS



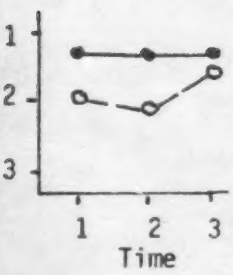
Number of Siblings (N = 33)
- 4 to 13
- 0 to 3

Groups $p = .008$



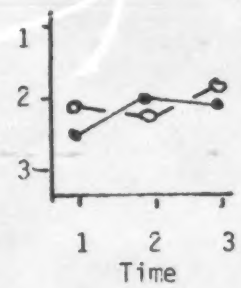
Education of Father (Hollingshead scale) (N = 30)
- high (1 to 4)
- low (5 to 7)

NS



Relationship with Siblings (N = 34)
- good
- poor

Groups $p < .10$



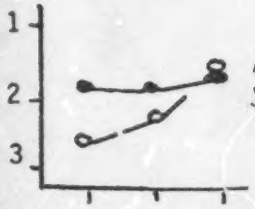
Economic status of childhood family (N = 18)
- above average
- below average

NS

Figure 3

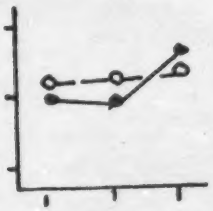
Relationship of Happy Childhood Reports

with Adult Measures



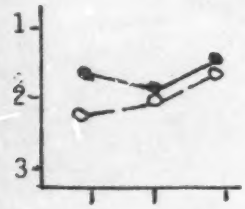
Attitude toward own home as a young adult (N = 18)
- good
- poor

Interaction $p < .07$



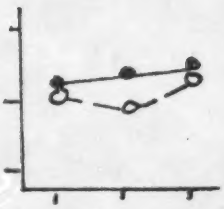
Education (Hollingshead scale) (N = 42)
- high (1 to 3)
- low (4 to 7)

NS



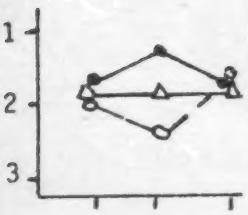
Number of own children (N = 42)
- 1 to 2
- 3 to 6

Group difference $p < .10$



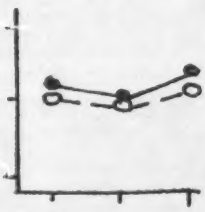
Age (N = 42)
- older (29 to 39)
- younger (18 to 28)

NS



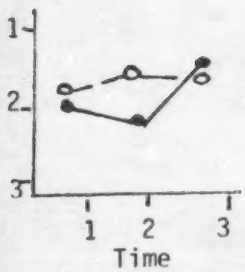
Emotional tone of subject's own family in Middle Age (N = 38)
- gay, happy
- average
- somber

Interaction $p < .02$



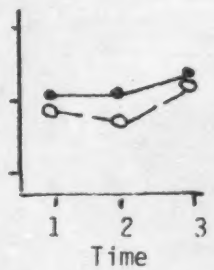
Occupation of Breadwinner in Middle Age (N = 25)
- high (1 to 3)
- low (4 to 7)

NS



IQ taken when young-old (N = 32)
- high (119 to 150)
- low (85 to 118)

Interaction $p < .02$



Life Satisfaction in young-old age (N = 38)
- high
- low

NS